

Pivot East Won't Solve Russia's Problems (Op-Ed)

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The authorities made a symbolic gesture in selecting Ufa, the capital of the ancient forest-steppe region of Bashkortostan, for the double summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. A combination of Russian and Bashkir customs greeted the visitors. As they disembarked from their airplane, the guests sampled the local bread and salt in traditional Russian fashion, and then entered a Bashkir yurt for tea with mare's milk. The Russian folk cuisine and the white yurt of Nomadic Turks were intended as the new symbols of the deepening unity between non-Western states.

Having quarreled with the West and become locked with it in the toughest confrontation since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is now placing its bets on the East and South. It hopes in this way to accomplish three main objectives: 1) avoid full-scale international isolation; 2) create a front of anti-Western states capable of challenging the dominance of the West and changing the rules in international politics, economics and institutions; and 3) replace the Western resources, technologies and markets Moscow has lost with non-Western ones.

President Vladimir Putin has very vigorously and effectively responded to the challenge of this confrontation with the West. He immediately intensified contacts with the Chinese, Indians, Brazilians and other non-Western countries. A continuous flow of proposals and initiatives pours out from Moscow, enough to make the other leaders' heads spin. Moscow has firmly taken the initiative in its own hands and, admittedly, done so quite successfully: The leaders of the largest non-Western states have already visited Russia for the second time in this year alone.

This fraternizing with the leaders of China, India, Pakistan, Iran and Brazil is also intended for domestic consumption. The arrival of those heads of state increases the authorities' prestige and indirectly lends tacit approval to the Kremlin's foreign policy. After all, if Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi support Putin, then Russia is doubtless doing the right thing!

However, in practice this approach will not achieve a single one of those goals. The much-touted "pivot to the South and East" will remain a "Potemkin village," a beautiful facade screening only a wasteland overgrown with the thick weeds of unrealized projects.

First, it will not solve the problem of Russia's isolation. Developing relations with the non-Western states reduces the degree of Russia's isolation, but it by no means eliminates it. Although the West's global influence is waning, the West continues to dominate the world economy and financial system and it remains the owner and creator of key technologies, policies and institutions. Building ties to non-Western states eases the burden of Russia's isolation, but does not remove it. It eases the symptoms without curing the disease itself. Without the participation of the West, the remaining states can reach regional and local decisions — concerning only the SCO, for example — but they cannot develop global policy.

Second, no other SCO or BRICS member state will follow Russia on its path of confrontation with the United States and the West. India, Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan and even China have long ago and firmly established deep and layered relations with the United States and the European Union, and none of them will put those relations at risk for the sake of Moscow's revanchist ambitions. Those countries share with Moscow at least 1) the desire to protect their sovereignty and prevent the West from interfering in their affairs; 2) the desire to adjust the balance of forces among such international organizations as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and others so as to benefit new power centers, primarily China and India. Even the latter goal might not work in Russia's favor. Accustomed to its historic role as a superpower, any adjustment in the balance of forces among international organizations would inevitably reduce, not increase Russia's influence, and as a result, its role in the global economy.

There really is nothing more that this so-called "anti-Western bloc" could have on its agenda.

Third, the new partners in the East and South will prove far more difficult and dangerous economically for Russia than its old partners in the West and North. They pay a lower price for oil and gas and they compete tooth and nail with Russian manufacturers in every market. For example, farmers in the Altai region complain that the Chinese flood the market with cheap honey and buckwheat. Agricultural producers also complain of cheap Chinese products, and so on in every sector.

China's enormous Great Silk Road Economic Belt project will tie the Central Asian states even closer to Beijing. However, practice has shown what China manages to extract from those countries: oil, gas, timber, land and other natural resources — and at rock-bottom prices.

At the same time, not a single SCO or BRICS state is able to provide Russia with the modernized financial resources it needs, much less the technologies it requires. What's more, those countries obtain their money, technologies, policies and institutions from the West — the one source from which Russia now so pointedly and haughtily refuses to buy, learn or borrow.

It might happen that, boiling over with energy and dragging its non-Western partners in its chosen direction, hosting opulent summits and hanging pretty banners over dilapidated Ufa buildings, Russia will finally overextend itself like an irresponsible merchant. Then, in a futile attempt to settle all scores with the help of militaristic bluster, Russia will find itself not only isolated from the West, but weaker both economically and technologically — even in comparison to the non-Western states it now looks to as saviors.

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